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(first of three parts)

The Faustus Tradition

in the Early Science Fiction Story

LELAND SAPIRO



§1 Introduction

Associated with pulp science-fiction at its start is the name of Hugo Gernsback, whose magazine, *Amazing Stories*, first featured it as a separate literary form.¹ Gernsback conceived his duty to be the purveyance of scientific knowledge in words comprehensible to any literate person, and to this end he frequently directed a particular story to his readers' attention because of the "excellent science" which it contained. "Every...physics teacher will want his class to read this story," stated a typical endorsement, "due to the excellent astronomical data contained in it" (Fall 1928, Page 530). "If you want...a good insight into the Einstein theory," claimed another, "here is your chance to get a ...palatable dose of it" (July 1927, Page 339).

But in addition to a new biological or mechanical discovery, in whose explication the science was reputed to consist, the "gadget" story also contained another incident: the scientist's unnatural death, which occurred with almost embarrassing regularity. Indeed, the most conspicuous element in the early Amazing story was not its science, but its spectacular destruction of the scientist: Professor Townsend, biologist, is digested by a "malignant entity," synthesized by himself;² Professor Moore, physicist, is "dematerialized" by his "Z-ray" into a "higher plane of vibration";³ Doctor William James Sidelberg, mathematician, is distorted beyond human likeness through a mis-setting of his "four dimensional roller-press."⁴

Invention, explanation, disaster -- such is the recurrent pattern. A representative example is Jack Burnette's "The Purple Death" (July 1929, Pages 370-374), which describes the last experiment of Bernard Grey, medical doctor, and George Le Brun, electronics expert. After verifying that radiation from their Le Brun tube is fatal to microbes, the two experimenters learn -- the hard way -- that this radiation also produces an "intangible change" in any material thus exposed, so that it disintegrates in ordinary sunlight:

The first intimation...that all was not well
was....a crash of glass....

Grey...rushed to the window. The sunlight...
made a large square of light on the floor.... Into
this square...Grey rushed; tried to stop and turn, at
the same time shrieking to Le Brun:

"Shut off the tube -- ultra-violet rays in sun-
li -- Ahhh!"

...Grey's legs...vanished, and the upper portion
of his body...fell into the sunlight and it, too, dis-
appeared...so that Le Brun's last glimpse of his friend
was of his...face contorted in agony...falling toward
the floor, yet vanishing before it touched.

Rushing to the control booth, Le Brun shut off
the tube.... Then, at full realization of the tragedy
...he fled from the laboratory.

Perhaps it would be best to say that he started
to flee, for as he rushed...into the sunlight, he, too,
was hurled into eternity.... Mandy, Grey's...house-
keeper, who was coming across the yard...vowed ever
afterward that:

"Mistuh Le Brun's ghos' rushed out ob de do' and
vanished right befo' mah naked eyes."

...Mandy's version of Le Brun's death gave the
...building a reputation of being haunted." (page 373)

That this almost certain elimination of the scientist was
not quite consistent with the magazine's ostensible policy, the en-

couragement of scientific research, was noticed, perhaps, by F. P. Swigget, Jr., who wrote to the editor:

"Perhaps this is...a little too harsh, but in many of your stories the hero either goes insane, is killed or else disappears.... This is especially true if the main character is an inventor."⁵

Conceivably, this type of ending could be attributed to the demands of veracity: the author has described (one might argue) the invention of something called the Le Brun tube; that such an apparatus really did not exist, therefore, could be explained only by the death of its inventor.

Such was the answer given to H. Sartmann, who had requested Gernsback to admonish his writers that unhappy endings were not necessary. "Ninety percent of all stories end tragically," complained this correspondent, "I am sure that American people appreciate a story with a cheerful ending."⁶ The editor replied that if the invention were not destroyed, "many simple-minded people would be misled." Readers of his magazine "will be surprised to learn," he continued, "how many simple-minded people there are in this country who actually believe that many scientific fiction stories are facts, rather than fancy."

Mr. Gernsback did not specify how many of these simple-minded people were readers of Amazing Stories. Nevertheless, while conceding the truth of his argument, we still hope for a more satisfactory answer -- to be attempted in this paper by means of the Faustus legend.

§2 Historical Background

Universally known is Christopher Marlowe's tragedy of Doctor Faustus, the magician who sells himself to the Devil in exchange for a supernaturally endowed life on earth.

All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;
A sound magician is a mighty god:
Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity!⁷

The ideas for the play were not Marlowe's own, but originated from the reputed activities of an itinerant medicine-man, George Sebillicus, who called himself "Faustus Junior." The career

of this self-styled magician was summarized by the physician Philip Begardus in his Index Sanitatis:

....some years ago he wandered through nearly every province, principality, and kingdom, made his name known to everyone, and boasted loudly of his great skill, not only in medicine, but also in chiromancy, necromancy, physiognomy, crystal-gazing, and other such arts.... He also acknowledged and did not deny that he was and was called Faustus, and designated himself as Philosophus Philosoporum, etc. However many people have complained to me that they were swindled by him.⁸

It seems impossible that the progenitor of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus could have been a person like George Sebillicus; but during his lifetime there existed other figures of genuine accomplishment (such as Reuchlin, Paracelsus, and Cornelius Agrippa), who also received the public title of sorcerer and whose deeds eventually were attributed to Faustus Junior.

Cornelius Agrippa, for example, was said to travel in the company of Satan himself, who assumed the form of an enormous dog, which at his master's death ran away "howling as only the devil can howl"⁹ -- and this story, when combined with Medieval legends of a diabolic blood-compact and attributed to a person named "Faustus," led to something of fantastic proportions:

I knew a man by the name of Faustus, from Kundling, a small town near my home. While a student at Cracow he learned magic.... Later he journeyed to many places and talked about secret things.... Some years ago this Johannes Faustus sat down sadly in a village of the Duchy of Wurtemberg. The host asked him why he was so downcast...to which he replied: "Do not be frightened tonight!" At midnight the house quaked. When at noon the next day Faustus had not yet risen, the host went into his room and found him lying beside the bed with his face twisted round, since the devil had killed him. During his lifetime he kept a dog, which was the devil....¹⁰

Finally, all such legends were collected together in the Faustbuch, published by Johann Spies at Frankfurt am Main. "It has often been a matter of astonishment to me," stated the pious introduction, "that nobody has composed a regular account of this fearful story...as a warning to the whole of Christendom."

But while the motivation of its publisher was doubtless the edification of his Christian readers, the story was nevertheless

a rapid commercial success, as indicated by the writing and production of Marlowe's drama, based not on the Faustbuch but on its English translation, less than two years after Spies's first printing.¹¹

The salutary effect of the play, if we are to believe its epilogue,¹² lies in its admonition concerning the wickedness of unlimited curiosity: Faustus has dared to investigate

Unlawful things
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practice more than heavenly power permits,

and the same punishment, it is implied, will be meted out to anyone else guilty of a similar crime.

However, this "forbidden" aspect of the legend was the precise reason for its popularity, for the reader could share the pleasure of Faustus' "godless curiosity" (to say nothing of his sensuality and mischief) and yet incur none of his guilt.

Faustus is therefore a parable of the impotent yearnings of the Middle Ages -- its passionate aspiration, its conscience-stricken desire, its fettered curiosity amid the cramping limits of imperfect knowledge, and irrational dogmatism.¹³

Our contention is that the attitude of "fascinated dread" originally displayed toward the Faustus legend was reproduced three centuries later in the Amazing story. The early science-fiction writers shared both the wish to peer into the workings of creation and the fear of retribution by the Creator: trying to evoke the wonder of discovery, they believed at the same time in the existence of "matters hid,"

Things not reveal'd, which th' invisible King,
Onely Omniscent, hath suppress in Night,
To none communicable in Earth or Heaven.

The search for hidden knowledge, therefore, is disobedience to God, and its merited punishment, the explanation for the almost certain death of the investigator.

With respect to the physical sciences, however, Hugo Gernsback's writers were restricted to the doctrine of "scientific materialism" with its universe of "irreducible brute matter," and therefore could not ascribe the scientist's misfortune to the anger of God. But the punishment still could be administered by a suitably personified "Nature," to whom were allocated those disciplinary measures formerly belonging to the Deity.



Thus Bob Olsen remarks, in his Four-Dimensional Roller-Press (June 1927, Page 307),

I have noticed that Nature has a way of visiting dire punishment upon importunate mortals who seek to pry too deeply into her secrets.

In his next story this author still has misgivings. When the protagonist is asked by a Professor Banning to construct a device for higher-dimensional surgery, he replies:

I'm not superstitious exactly, but sometimes I think that Nature resents our efforts to pry into her secrets -- and punishes those who are too rash and importunate in wresting knowledge from her.¹⁴

It is to Olsen's credit that he was able to formulate this idea consciously, and in so doing, reject it -- as is seen from Professor Banning's rejoinder:

Nonsense!...if that were so, Thomas A. Edison, Orville Wright, Robert Milliken and hundreds of other great men would have been destroyed long ago...

The tacit meaning of "nature" in the Amazing story coincided at times with the orthodox notion of Providence. This, in turn, is to be regarded as a compromise between two opposing viewpoints, under which nature was conceived as a moral order -- in the Hebraic world-view -- used by the Deity to punish and reward, or as a physical order described by mathematical law -- the Newtonian world-view.

Newton's achievement, it must be explained, was to deduce from his law of gravitation "the movements of the planets, the comets, the moon, and the sea" -- and therefore to prompt the general belief that all other events could be explained in like fashion. Hence the entire physical universe was thought to be reducible to a scurrying of material, with motions specified by Newtonian dynamics.

But such a world-mechanism will function automatically, without intervention of the Deity. The Guardian of former times is now to be regarded as an abstract First Cause -- initiator of that causal sequence comprising the world's past history -- who

would be an unnecessary hypothesis, except for the original act of creation.

This impersonal concept of the Deity being unacceptable, there arose the Christian doctrine of Providence, in which God still could intercede in human affairs by means of breaks and side-linkages in the causal chain -- a viewpoint expressed in modern times by David H. Keller in The Psychophonic Nurse (November 1928, Page 717):

He stopped for a few seconds, braced himself against the wind, took off his coat and wrapped it around the crying child. Then he went on, fast as he could, breathing when he could and praying continuously. God answered him by sending occasional short lulls in the tornado.

Of course, there did not appear in Gernsback's magazine any consistent denotation of "nature," either explicit or implicit. Thus the "forces of nature" represented for Gernback himself the latent energy inherent in matter,¹⁵ whereas "Nature's inexorable laws"¹⁶ were understood by A. Hyatt Verrill to be God's agency in punishing the scientist's impiety. And somewhere between these two extremes, "nature" could still represent the great I-Know-Not-What.

Consider "The Infinite Vision"¹⁷ by Charles Winn.

Here we witness the debut of Professor Flaxworthy's new telescope, so powerful that it is "capable of revealing molecules of the rocks of the moon." First there is conducted, for the benefit of some visiting scientists, a lecture tour of the observatory. Then comes the climax of the story: a close-up of the planet Mars -- followed by the hideous revelation that "unseen eyes are ever watching us from space." For it transpires that the Martians, in turn, have been observing the earth with an apparatus almost the exact duplicate of Professor Flaxworthy's.

The experiment is ended by a bolt of lightning, which wrecks the telescope and its associated electrical equipment -- and as the scientists feel their way in the dark,

....the thunder drums of Nature rolled out a paean of victory, over the shattered fragments of the rash mortals who fain would know her innermost secrets.

Why Nature has not been equally unkind to the Martian astronomers the author neglects to explain.

Previously, we alluded to the belief that certain knowledge was not intended by the Deity for human beings to possess. But to

estimate more accurately the guilt of the Faustian scientist, we must understand why excessive curiosity might entail a crime worse than disobedience.

First of all, science was conceived during the Middle Ages as leading to impiety, this attitude being largely a result of the inherited Biblical and Patristic traditions. The astronomers, according to St. Augustine, can predict many years in advance eclipses of the sun or moon, so that other persons "that know not this art, marvel and are astonished."¹⁸ But these scientists "search not religiously": their studies are not for the glory of God but for their own: therefore they "exalt, and are puffed up," and by such "ungodly pride" remove themselves from Divine favor.

But such vanity has no limit: excessive pride in his accomplishments might conceivably lead the magician-scientist to the supreme blasphemy of asserting himself equal to the Creator -- as was done by the third century wonder-worker, Simon Magus, the original "Faustus Senior,"¹⁹ who proclaimed:

"I am able to render myself invisible... I can change my countenance... I shall ascend by flight into the air... I shall be worshipped as God...."

Comparing Simon's assertion with

A sound magician is a mighty god:
Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity,

we see that the two crimes differ only in magnitude.

The guilt of Faustus -- and, potentially, of anyone choosing to follow knowledge -- lies in his desire for omnipotence, which is not just a moral wrong, but a religious offense against the Deity. Indeed, it was exactly this "aspiring pride and insolence" which led to the fall of Lucifer himself.

Assuredly it is pride and the greatest offence of all to use the gifts we have received as if they were part of our very selves, and after having accepted favors to usurp the glory of the Bestower.²¹

It cannot be claimed that during the Middle Ages science was viewed with repugnance, but at the best it was regarded as irrelevant to the more urgent business of salvation. A man's life on earth was conceived only as a preliminary to a second existence, and how he spent this future life depended not on his scientific knowledge but on the state of his soul. Even if science is not an evil in itself, states Arnobius, it is still conducive to evil insofar as it distracts the mind from something far more important:

What business of yours...to inquire whether the sun is larger than the earth, or measures only a foot in breadth: whether the moon shines with borrowed light, or from her own brightness.... Leave these things to God.... Your interests are in jeopardy -- the salvation, I mean, of your souls; and unless you give yourselves to seek...the Supreme God, a cruel death awaits you...not bringing sudden annihilation, but long protracted punishment.²²

Since Arnobius (who antedates the fall of Rome) is separated by the entire span of the Middle Ages from Johann Spies (who published his "Faustbuch" in 1587), it is clear that the belief in the wickedness implied by curiosity existed many centuries before its articulation in the legend of Faustus.

§3 The Newtonian World-Machine

However, the belief in the uselessness of science was gradually diminished as a result of the secularization which characterized European thought from the Renaissance onward -- and following the extensive success of Newtonian mechanics there no longer existed any systematized derision of profane knowledge. We may take 1687, publication date of Newton's Principia -- and exactly one century after the first printing of the Faustbuch -- as marking the expiration of what may be called the secular phase of the Faustus tradition.

But although the Newtonian world might appeal to the asthetic sense of the mathematician, it was not a hospitable abode for the rest of humanity.

Wherever was taught...the universal formula of gravitation, there was also insinuated as a nimbus of surrounding belief that man is but the puny and local spectator, nay irrelevant product of an infinite self-moving engine,...enshrining the rigour of mathematical relationships while banishing into impotence all ideal imaginations...devoid of any qualities that might spell satisfaction for the major interests of human nature....²³

The Faustus tradition in its modern reappearance, therefore, is essentially a protest against Newton, whose "God-abandoned universe"²⁴ was just a gigantic aggregate of masses drifting through absolute space and time. Human aspirations can still be fulfilled in such a world -- but only if they do not conflict with the laws of Newtonian mechanics.



This indifference of the Newtonian world-machine is expressed admirably by Henry Simmons in his description of the misadventures suffered by a young inventor named Hicks,²⁵ who invariably gets entangled in the workings of the mechanical universe. In accordance with the Baconian direction that through science "human life be endowed with new discoveries and powers," Hicks constructs various automatic devices -- but unfortunately the mechanical components of Hicks's inventions are unaware of his good intentions.

The first story concerns Hicks's automatic self-serving

dining table, whose initial trial is to be, in the words of its inventor, "an event of no inconsiderable importance in the annals of Modern Progress." The apparatus is simply a circular dining table, capable of being rotated by machine, which is fitted around its circumference with clamps to fasten the dishes and nozzles through which drinks are pumped from the kitchen.

....The first course was to be soup.

"If each of you will please pass this spout on to his neighbor you will see with what rapidity a dish otherwise hard to handle will be served by my invention."

He passed the spout marked "Tomato Soup" to Uncle Jeremiah. The latter turned the quick action stop-clock. The liquid struck the far incline of his soup-plate. It was under two hundred lbs. pressure.

There is a natural law that the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection. That law has never been known to fail.... The tomato-soup, therefore, issued from the plate...at the identical angle at which it hit the plate. Uncle Jeremiah's countenance was in line.... In two seconds he was painted...like a Red Indian...painted, with not an inch left out.

The meal is culminated when a mis-setting of a throttle lever causes the table rapidly to increase its rate of spin. Within a short time the centrifugal forces on the various dishes exceeds the restraining forces exerted by their clamps, and in accordance with Newton's laws of motion the dishes and their contents are hurled outward at the diners "with the force of projectiles." Mr. Simmons gives us an impressive catalogue of matter in motion:

The air was thick with missiles. Pieces of fish, plates, cups, knives, saucers, forks, spoons, gravy dishes with contents, chicken pie, pork sausages, steaks, green salads, pies, tarts...boxes of pepper, salt and cinnamon ...were flying through the air....

That table certainly had been well supplied with everything.

It will be worthwhile to quote from the next of these accounts, "The Automatic Apartment," in which Hicks demonstrates his mechanical living quarters. Hicks has just finished drenching his guests by what is presumably the automatic floor-washer, and by a second over-sight has caused the suction machinery in the ceiling to operate in reverse, thus emptying on his visitors several weeks' accumulation of dirt. The indignant guests now exit from the room:

The shoe shining machine trap door opened out into the room at the exact moment that the professor approached with a dignified step. Just then he slipped ...and fell, landing on his back, with his neck on the foot-rest of the shoe shining machine.... Instantly, the foot clamp swung over, lovingly taking hold of the professor's throat and gently but determinedly holding down his head. Before our horrified gaze, the stiff revolving brushes appeared...and with a couple dozen swift and vigorous strokes prepared the professor's ears for what was to come.... Even with the full realization of the situation, I could not refrain from admiring the thoroughness and fantastic speed with which those brushes worked.

There had been a previous representation of the grandeur of man; but here we see the converse idea, which is not (as might be supposed) the insignificance of man, but his absurdity. A rumor has been circulated that humanity possesses by the very act of thought a status higher than that of inanimate matter; man is more noble than the universe which destroys him, says Pascal, since he knows that he is being destroyed and the universe does not. But Pascal's account must be qualified by Hicks's observation that the universe, not concerned with man, operates according to the laws of physics, and therefore cannot recognize the embarrassment which this behavior occasionally causes for human beings.

There is no sin in a Newtonian universe, but only mechanical error. Punishment is no longer administered by the Deity -- who is infinitely far away -- but by the machinery of the world, via the law of cause and effect. And in a sense the discipline is more rigorous than before, since it cannot be tempered by the Divine quality of forgiveness. But even when the operation of the machinery causes great discomfort, its very efficiency and impersonality make us respect it.

Even with the full realization of the situation, I could not refrain from admiring the thoroughness and fantastic speed with which those brushes worked.

Nevertheless, while the functioning of the world-mechanism might command respect, it could never replace the personal attention that used to be given by its Creator.

But the Newtonian Philosophy entails still other consequences, arising not so much from any particular mathematical results as from its method of Mechanistic Analysis, which is simply the devising of explanations based entirely on the actions of force and matter. The word "mechanistic" in this context bears no connotations of levers and pulleys or any other machine components, but refers merely to the exclusion of purpose as a legitimate cause.

Now, the most spectacular application of Newtonian methods was made not by Newton himself, but nearly two centuries later by Charles Darwin, whose version of Mechanistic Analysis was announced under the title, Natural Selection. For, the selection by the environment of favorable survival characteristics is automatic or "mechanistic" in the sense that a sieve mechanically sorts out large pebbles from small.

Some possible results of Newtonian Biology are described in Francis Flagg's nightmare-type story, "The Machine Man of Ardathia" (November 1927, Pages 798-804).

The narrator, Mr. Matthews, states that one evening there materialized into his study a glass cylinder containing something best described as a "caricature of a man." Scarcely three feet high, suspended within its container by an assemblage of glass and metal tubing, the creature bears only a slight resemblance to a human being.

The head was very large and hairless; it had bulging brows, and no ears. The eyes were large, winkless; the nose well-defined; but the lower part of the face and mouth ran into the small round body with no sign of a chin. Its legs hung down, skinny, flabby; and the arms were more like short tentacles reaching down from where the head and body came together. The thing was, of course, naked. (Page 799)

The Ardathian, as this being calls itself, explains that it originates from a temporal point nearly thirty thousand years in Matthews's future. Matthews regards his visitor as a monstrosity, but his visitor holds this same opinion about Matthews, who learns that he is a "prehistoric man," a specimen of "that race of early men whose skeletons we have dug up...and reconstructed for our schools of biology."



developed, through the embryonic state, by an incubator. The Ardathian describes how its own race is to evolve still further:

"Among the Ardathians there are no males or females. The cell from which we are to develop is created synthetically. It is fertilized by means of a ray and then put into a cylinder such as you observe surrounding me. As the embryo develops, the various tubes and mechanical devices are introduced into the body by our mechanics and become an integral part of it. When the young Ardathian is born, he does not leave the case in which he has developed. That case -- or cylinder as you call it -- protects him from the action of a hostile environment." (Page 802)

But the unaided conquest of a "hostile environment" is necessary for the development of each human creature, for continual reliance on automatic devices will enervate the muscular and perceptual faculties: the machine, in Charles Dana's terminology, is the "great Neuter," the "eunuch of eunuchs," which, figuratively and literally, "emasculates us all."

"Are there any questions you would like to ask?" came the metallic voice.

"Yes," I said at last, half fearfully. "What joy can there be in existence for you? You have no sex; you cannot mate. It seems to me," I hesitated, "it seems to me that no hell could be greater than centuries of living caged alive inside that thing you call an envelope...." (Page 803)

There is yet another evil. Previously, man shared at least a token of Divinity, for although God might be excluded, by Newtonian

"Marvelous how our scientists have copied you from some fragments of bone! The small head covered with hair; the beast-like jaw; the abnormally large body and legs; the artificial coverings made of cloth...even your language!" (Page 800)

The earliest people for which the Ardathians possess written records are the Bi-Chanics, who (sometime in Matthews's future) give their offspring artificial birth by removing from the female the fertilized ovum, which then is

physics, from the material world, His image still is imprinted on the human soul -- but now this, too, is to be explained in mechanical terms, by Newtonian biology.

For the first time, I began to get an inkling of what the Ardathian meant when it alluded to itself as a Machine Man. The appalling story of man's final evolution into a controlling center that directed a mechanical body, awoke something akin to fear in my heart. If it were true, what of the soul, spirit, God.... (Page 802)

Thus does one person contemplate the dissolution of the human spirit.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Footnotes

- 1) In our somewhat restricted usage, "science-fiction" denotes the monthly periodical Amazing Stories, abbreviated Amz. (or the tri-monthly Amazing Stories Quarterly, Amz. Q.), while "early" refers to the time-interval from April 1926 through December 1929 -- during which the magazine was edited by Hugo Gernsback (through April 1929), Arthur H. Lynch (May through October 1929), and T. O'Conor Sloane. For brevity (and with negligible loss in accuracy) we speak of Hugo Gernsback as "the editor," since Gernsback's general policy was followed closely by his successors.
- 2) Otis A. Kline, "The Malignant Entity," Amz., June 1926, 272-279, 286 f., reprinted from Weird Tales, May 1924.
- 3) Robert A. Wait, "The Invisible Finite," Amz., May 1929, 172-179. Hereafter, we omit the name of the magazine except where there is possible ambiguity.
- 4) Bob Olsen (pseudonym of Alfred John Olsen, Jr.), "The Four-Dimensional Roller Press," June 1927, 302-307.
- 5) "Discussions," February 1928, 1112.
- 6) "Discussions," February 1927, 1077.
- 7) I, 57-64. Quotations from Doctor Faustus are taken from the "Temple Dramatists" edition of Sir Israel Gollancz (London, 1897).
- 8) Full title: Index Sanitatis, Eyn scheus und vast nutzlich Buchlein genannt Zeyger der Gesundheit. (1539). The

original is quoted by Franz Neubert, Vom Doctor Faustus Zu Goethes Faust (Leipzig, 1932), xiii.

9) Quoted by Henry M. Pachter, Magic into Science (New York, 1951), 61. The dog reappears in the second scene of Goethe's play, when Mephistopheles, in the form of a black poodle, meets Faust outside the city gates and accompanies him home.

10) Johann Mennel, Locorum communium collectanea a J. Manilo permultos annos pleraque tum ex lectionibus D. Philippi Melanchton tum ex aliorum doctissimorum vivorum relationibus excerpta. (1563). The passage is quoted in P. M. Palmer and Robert P. More, The Sources of the Faust Tradition from Simon Magus to Lessing (New York, 1936), pp. 101-102.

11) The first edition of the Faustbuch appeared in 1587, while Doctor Faustus, under the commonly accepted view, "was in all likelihood written not later than 1589" (Albert G. Latham, Introduction, Goethe's Faust (New York, 1941), xxxi). A dissenting opinion is registered by Tucker Brooke ("The Marlowe Canon," PMLA XXXVII (1922), (367-417), who states (p 384) that there is no good reason for assuming that Doctor Faustus was in existence...prior to 1592."

12) These lines probably were not written by the original author, it being "common ground that...changes were made after Marlowe's death" (J. M. Robertson, Marlowe, A Conspectus (London, 1931), p 70).

13) J. A. Symonds, The Renaissance in Italy (New York, 1881), II, 54.

14) Bob Olsen, "Four-Dimensional Surgery," February 1928, 1082.

15) See Amz. Q., Summer 1928, 418: "When man tampers with the forces of nature, something is always likely to happen....Today we handle ordinary matter exactly as savages would handle dynamite."

16) A. Hyatt Verrill, "The Ultra-Elixir of Youth," Amz., August 1927, 481.

17) May 1926, 136-139, 147; reprinted from Science and Invention, May 1924.

18) St. Augustine, Confessions, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York, 1957), p. 66.

19) See Beatrice D. Brown, "Marlowe, Faustus, and Simon Magus," PMLA, LIV (1939), 82-121.

20) Pseudo-Clement, "Recognitions," The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1886), II, 99.

21) St. Bernard, On the Love of God, trans. Terence L. Connolly (New York: Spiritual Book Associates), Ch. II, Para. IV.

22) The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen (Buffalo, 1886), VI, 457.

23) E. A. Burtt, Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science (New York, 1954), p. 301.

24) Newton himself had supposed that God must still remain on duty to correct irregularities in the motions of the planets, but his successors showed that no such readjustments were necessary. For details, see E. A. Burtt, op. cit.

25) Henry Hugh Simmons, "Hicks' Inventions with a Kick":
 "The Automatic Self-Serving Dining Table," April 1927, 52-57, 99.
 "The Automatic Apartment," August 1927, 493-497, 512 ff.
 "The Electro-Hydraulic Bank Protector," December 1927, 860-869.
 "The Perambulating Home," August 1928, 450-460.

TO OUR READERS:

I regret the increase in price, but its justification is by simple arithmetic. A paid circulation of 500 at 25¢ apiece means a gross intake of \$125. Since the cost of printing each issue is about \$175, the subsequent loss of \$50 per issue will be made up by charging each hypothetical reader an extra dime. Of course, all previous dollar subscriptions to RQ--or to Jon White's or Ron Smith's INSIDE--will be honoured, as well as all lifetime subscriptions to Roy Squires' Fantasy Advertiser.



Note: The speaker prefaced his talk with these informal remarks:

Tony Boucher once said that I wrote most convincingly about very young and very old people--the two things I knew the least about. So my talk tonight will be especially appropriate: a person who no longer writes science-fiction is going to talk to an audience that no longer reads it.

Science-fiction writers are individualists--in the main, intelligent, opinionated, and alienated: at least the ones I know. The stories they write, more than any other type except Literature, bear the stamp of their authors. Even in matters of style, the individuality is apparent. They are like jazz musicians: the skilled observer listens for a moment and knows who's playing.

Take a Bradbury story, for example; from the opening paragraph, it bears his unmistakable stamp. This is true, to a somewhat lesser degree, of Sturgeon, van Vogt, Heinlein, Davidson, Vance--and even when the style is of a more common cut, the sense-of-author emerges as the story progresses.

The individual science-fiction writer maintains in print, at least, rather firm and consistent convictions about the nature of things. When it comes to his philosophy, he is seldom confused or uncertain. He knows where he stands, he knows how things ought to be. There is a unique essence, a flavor, an inevitability.

This individuality sets science-fiction apart from other types of fiction. In other fields, particularly the slicks, there is better craftsmanship and even better story tellers. But the authors there, to my mind, merge away into a certain grey interchangeability. They don't convey the impression of being the sort of people you'd want to meet socially. You wouldn't have anything to talk to them about. Imagine someone telling a detective story writer, "You're a real nut." In science-fiction, it happens all the time. In slick fiction, if I dislike a story, I dislike it, and that's that. In science-fiction, if I dislike a story, I begin to work up a little feeling about the author, too. No one, it seems to me, would ever feel any great personal involvement with The Saturday Evening Post; with the science-fiction magazines, it's almost inevitable. You are dealing not with stories, but with human personalities.

It has often been said that science-fiction gives greater freedom to its authors than any other branch of popular fiction. A generalization, often enough repeated, puts me on guard. What do we have the freedom not to do? Well, in science-fiction we have the freedom not to write about emotions. We can write about ideas all we want, but we better let decent human emotions, such as sex and love, pretty much alone. And when these subjects are handled, they are handled on about the same level as on television.

But because intellectual freedom does exist, in the area of ideas, people interested in ideas, emotionally involved with ideas, are attracted to the field. They write out of love for ideas. Yet, in the main, I think they are amateur thinkers and philosophers. (It has been pointed out that writers as a class are not professional thinkers. Science-fiction writers are more or less unique in that we act as though we are.) A philosopher or a scientist builds his theories by accumulating and arranging, often at great labor, a set of observations about the way things really are as precisely as can be determined. A science-fiction writer takes a theory which he finds emotionally satisfying and invents an environment to fit it. I will come back to this a little later; my point here is that science-fiction writers are essentially hobbyists rather than professional thinkers.

And writing science-fiction is today, in the main, a hobby. With few exceptions it's not the writer's main source of income. The pay is not good, and consequently standards are not very high. The skilled professional, after learning his craft here, deserts to more lucrative, if less emotionally satisfying, markets.

Even when style is polished, there is awkwardness of narrative technique. The science-fiction writer is preoccupied with the intellectual content, and he has neither the patience, desire, nor incentive for the tedious labor involved in the mastery of form. I think this is one of the major reasons the better science-fiction short stories are more memorable, and certainly better written, than the novels. A man of limited skills can build a beautiful book case, let us say, where he would make a total botch of a high-rise apartment building.

This amateurishness is not entirely a fault. The field becomes more exciting and less predictable. Stunning and quite unexpected successes go hand-in-hand with equally stunning and unexpected ham-handed failures. And sometimes a rare hybrid occurs: a story which artistically is a failure but none the less virtually unforgettable because of the brilliance of the concept--"Universe" and "Farewell to the Master" are two examples that come to mind.

We have in science-fiction, then, individuality, flourishing in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom presented with the unpredictability that contains always the promise of unexpected brilliance. Initial exposure brings, indeed, a sense of wonder. A whole exciting world blossoms from the arid desert of print. It is best approached in the teens, when the mind is receptive to new ideas--when, more properly, ideas are new--when the individual first becomes consciousness of the vastness of man's intellectual horizon. Then science-fiction bursts on you with dazzling and unforgettable radiance, completely different from anything else available in the popular culture.

But the great strengths are weaknesses as well. To those who come upon science-fiction later in life, the amateurishness is annoying, the quality of the thinking is too often derivative. The emotional and intellectual needs of the well-informed and experienced reader are not fully met. The older reader is more, rather than less, self-centred than the teenager. He is more concerned with the significance of his own flesh and emotions--more concerned with trying to bring some meaning and understanding to his own brief mortality. He wants to hear of bodily processes and glandular reactions--of individual emotional responses to an environment that corresponds to some real world. The older reader is interested, I think, not in an intellectual concept of society but in a realistic discussion of group interactions. He wants to fit individuals to groups and group environments rather than to abstract ideas.



Here I am conscious of a fundamental weakness in science-fiction. There are far too few works like Man in the High Castle and far too many works like Stranger in a Strange Land. Too often in science-fiction, there is a lack of inner reality. The characters are independent of the environment. They are twentieth century Americans set down in strange worlds. Too much of our future history is cultural chauvinism. We assume that our contemporary definitions of freedom, democracy, humanitarianism, beauty, universal definitions.

love, art, etc., are eternal and universal values. Medieval scholars, doubtless, thought the bed-rock values of their society were the only ones proper to the human condition: a pyramid of ascending authority and descending obligations, with each individual born to die in a particular niche. Change was anathema: because its social consequences could not be circumscribed and limited. We are perhaps in a like situation today. Science-fiction writers, like most contemporary citizens, see any values other than contemporary ones as automatically bad. The future revolutions we project are either counter-revolutionary or costume pieces from the 18th and 19th century extrapolated to the 21st.

Man, as I see him, is a logical computer with an emotionally programmed capacity for irrational action. He will never perfectly adjust to any environment--nor will he, in the mass, be completely alienated by any. We live today in a stark age of change. Our computers are programmed to an environment that is no longer with us. So we are now irrational on both the emotional and rational level. We have lost our capacity to respond to present reality; or more properly, we respond to present reality by reflexes conditioned to an earlier time. A person who is sensitive to this difficulty is not rewarded when he reads the confusion compounded in science-fiction.

Man will ultimately come to grips with the new environment in a logical fashion--he has no choice if he wishes to survive. Man will come to grips with the age of technology at the expense of cherished beliefs, and, of course, will develop new --and perhaps dramatically different--illogical but satisfying outlets for his emotions. In the main, science-fiction writers do not see the environment changing man: only man changing the environment. Any basic social changes are always seen at the expense of the individual, and are disapproved of on the basis of values which are no longer even completely applicable to the contemporary situation.

Science-fiction, then, has not encouraged the type of viewpoint that is likely to be most appealing to the older readers; it has not encouraged writers concerned with paradoxes, with shifting values, with complex interactions and feedback mechanisms. Science-fiction has an almost built-in bias against this type of writing. The bias is inherent in the very names: science and fiction.

In so far as science-fiction deals with science, it deals with ideas which are, within our present knowledge and within the limits of the statement of the idea, demonstrably true to the extent they are virtually infallible operational tools. Science-fiction writers are accustomed to think in terms of truths. This leads to a certain dogmatism. The methods of science are cast out, the certitude remains. A theory is justified not by the scholarly or scientific but by the engineering approach--the penny-in-the-fuse-box mentality--"After all, it works." Or alternatively, by the mystical approach: there are more real things than are dreamed of in the real world of science. Such theories are general, the phenomena (when present) or the applications are specific; no necessary connexion between the two is ever convincingly developed, but implications radiate outward by a circular logic that justifies cause by effect and effect by cause to encompass social events, interpersonal relationships, and fundamental universal laws. This gives rise to a whole subclass of paranoia that alternately repels and fascinates the fans and disgusts the more general reader.

The tendency for ideas to vanish into paranoia is encouraged by the second aspect of the field: fiction. Science-fiction is almost inherently more fiction than other kinds of fiction. Because of the emphasis on ideas and theories, there is small premium placed on realistic observation: the characters are unreal, the environment is plastic, shaped not to the dictates of the world but of the Idea. There is often no real reference point of reality to be had. The battles are fought in an individual cosmos removed from that strange here and now we are accustomed to relating to--and are narrated with fantastic self-deceptions likewise removed far from the charming, honest, and unpretentious world of fantasy. If the more mature reader is not to be given the final satisfaction of literature, he might at least be spared the excesses of madness.

--The fan, too, is not really much different from other readers; he merely starts earlier, and as he grows later, hopes more fervently to recapture his youth. One day, he becomes the older reader, but with memories.

There are many stages of fandom before the fan passes to the Nirvana of non-reading, and becomes a critic and collector, or before he gafiates* entirely. Fans, during the virulent, or reading, phase, expecting more, are more forgiving. They know that the harder the way, the more glorious the reward. But there comes a time when, with perspective, the old fan sees each writer in the whole: devoting an enormous amount of effort to repeating himself. Individuality becomes eccentricity. The writers are each obsessed by seldom more than two fixed ideas. The intellectual excitement once experienced degenerates to the equivocal joy of a dry orgasm. For the older fan, something essential, some life-giving ingredient, is missing from much of the writing. You lose your sense of wonder when you know what is going to happen next.

The basic fault is perhaps too few science-fiction magazines. We need young, brash, crude, exciting magazines to make new converts--magazines like the old "Startling," "Thrilling Wonder," "Planet." We need a tier of intermediate magazines to satisfy the needs of the transition period. And finally, we need a magazine to provide stimulation and enlightenment for the old, world-weary fan and console him in his dotage. Our present crop of magazines is placed in an impossible position of trying to appeal to too many audiences at once. Fans do not all have the same level of needs in their fiction. There is not one science-fiction audience, but several. No one, any more, gets quite what he wants. And in the most vital area of all, the making of converts, the magazines seem most seriously to be failing. The yellow brick road terminates too far from the comic magazines.

Judging from the circulation figures of the science-fiction magazines, the situation is just short of desperate. Year in and year out, each magazine has about the same number of readers--and this means that each year they are reaching a smaller percentage of the population. Eventually, unless something is done, the competitive pressure on distributors and news-stand operators will eliminate the science-fiction magazines entirely.

* Gafia--Getting away from it all. Dropping of all fan activity, temporarily or permanently.
Gafiate--Leave fandom (from "gafia").

Donald Franson, A Key to the Terminology of Science-Fiction Fandom (The National Fantasy Fan Federation, 1962), page 6.

If this happens, I do not suppose for a moment that science-fiction itself will die--unless, of course, as is perhaps not unlikely, written fiction is a dying art form soon to join the ranks of epic poetry--

Science-fiction short stories will continue to be published in the general magazines after the collapse of the science-fiction magazines. This new science-fiction will have improved technique and reduced content. It will conform. Such more vital stories as are written will appear in book and pocketbook form from time to time--but will, I venture, be slanted to the more general reader and have less amateurishness and less excitement. The novel will continue, perhaps in increased number, but with more conventionalized structure. In television and movies--essentially cooperative rather than individual art forms--the individualist flavor of science-fiction will continue to be missing: the words without the tune. The science-fiction audience, as it now exists, will be scattered and lost: the monthly habit broken--the yellow brick road bombed out.

We here will be left with our nostalgia--and our friendships--for who here is not indebted to fandom for his best friends and some of his happiest moments?

I think we hold a torch called fandom that we'd like to pass on to the future generations. To me, the world is virtually inconceivable without it. What a poor dreary place! Yet the winds of change are upon us. We will ingather ourselves for warmth and companionship during the coming years as our numbers vanish away. We have participated in a mutual sharing of experiences that has hurt no one and enriched ourselves.

But if fandom dies--it will live again, transmuted... Groups such as this in spirit will gather again and again in the future to celebrate art forms we cannot now imagine, but with such passion as we know well.

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS:

Please do not accompany your MS with a letter saying that your story once won a prize in such and such a contest or that you already have placed seventeen stories in professional magazines or that you now are teaching a class in English or Creative Writing or that because of your age you ought to know more about literary composition than the presumably youthful editor.

A review of The Star King,
by Jack Vance; Galaxy,
December 1963,
February 1964.



The BOREDOM of FANTASY ARTHUR JEAN COX

Jack Vance's latest novel, The Star King--a better title might have been Men of the Oikumene, or, perhaps, Beyond the Pale--is hardly a fit successor to The Dragon Masters. The story never develops or satisfies the interests which the excitingly varied and unconfining background seems to promise. The "quotations" which open each chapter are too long and numerous and, it will be objected, often over-reach themselves by introducing matters which are never made any use of in the narrative. The length is oddly disproportionate to the story-matter; not merely too long (although the last part is somewhat padded, which is unusual in Vance) but seemingly broken or dysplastic. Many pages are written in a perfunctory way and there are incidental crudities. Altogether, The Star King must be considered the weakest of Vance's long stories.

Is there, then, anything to talk about? Apparently, there is. At least, there seems to be plenty to think about, because we notice that after we put down the magazine, especially the first installment, the story goes on fermenting inside our heads: something, anyway, has been excited. We are busy working over the fictive world that has been presented to us. It is a world which seems to offer such possibilities for action, change, and freedom of movement.

Its topography is this: a cheap and extremely fast space drive makes easy travel over galactic distances. The result has been the explosive populating of hundreds of habitable planets and the never-ceasing discovery of new ones. The more populous and early-discovered planets form a loose confederation of worlds, the Oikumene; they are largely autonomous but share various overlapping functions, such as a police force. The police cannot legally go beyond the Pale (beyond the area of domesticated space) and there are, out there, many lawless and sparsely inhabited worlds and newly-discovered ones. (One of the good things in the novel is a "quotation" in which Vance neatly summarizes the ever-present Police Problem.) All these multitudinous planets, within and without the Pale, are enormously varied in their basic characters. The reader easily considers that such a world might be a better world than the one he lives in. It is open and unlimited, the cops aren't all-powerful, there are places for an honest man to hide. There is no monotony, no boundaries to travel or ambition, anything seems possible. Our individuality is rendered inconspicuous and yet exalted by the contemplation of such a spectacle, by the numberless worlds, cities, and peoples. There are patches of meanness and squalor, of course, but they are interesting in their own way as specimens of the variety (just as the slums of a great city might appeal to a tourist).

This is an exciting vision, not completely unfamiliar to science-fiction. The writer's problem is how to realize these palpable possibilities in a narrative; that is, how to make use of all this swarming diversity in a way satisfying to the speculative curiosity. An adventure story is the obvious answer; in particular, the story of a quest, a sojourn at length among a representative sampling of novel settings and societies. This would seem to be such a story at first--although a quest of revenge, which has its dangers; but towards the end it shifts shape into something like a mystery story, in which the object is to finger one of a small number of suspects, an action too limited to take much account of the limitless background. And along the way only a handful of worlds have been visited.

This inability to realize adequately in action the significance of the background probably prompted the chapter heading quotations which not only supply necessary information but might be called the philosophy of the novel. The source of one of these is given as "Preface to Men of the Oikumene, by Jan Holberk Vaenz LXII," and so possibly is to be credited with some authority.

"There is a stifling quality to this age which has been observed, remarked and lamented by a number of contemporary anthropologists: a curious paradox, because never before have such variegated opportunities and possible channels of life existed.

The most important fact of human life is the infinity of space: the bounds of which can never be reached, the worlds without number still unseen....

(Ch. VI)

"Stifling" is a strange word. If we have trouble breathing, isn't it because the atmosphere is too rarified rather than too close? But we can see, I think, what is meant: when anything is possible, the necessary loses its accustomed weight. Venturesome action tends to become random and absurd; it is exciting and novel, perhaps, but irrelevant to ordinary concerns. Politically, mass society unravels at its edges into anarchy. Morally, there is permissiveness, which is good, but unstructured permissiveness, quite often unregardful of serious needs.

Against the backdrop of this brilliant galactic world the author poses a kind of contrasting world. A "locater," Lugo Teehalt, has discovered a beautiful earth-like planet of green valleys and hills, meadows and wooded brooks. In short, a place such as we might all dream of, or a place such as we might all recognize as the satisfaction of our obscure longing for a homely paradise; as a picture it lacks only a thatched cottage in the foreground to be idyllically complete.



This landscape already has tenants, however: delicate dryad-like creatures, which feed on huge grubs burrowing under the ground and have, apparently, some intimate relationship with a forest of trees bearing crops of wasps or stinging insects. This is a puzzling addition to the picture. It seems unnecessarily elaborate and impractical, something calculatingly ingenious and fantastic. (It may be that we feel some annoyance at the author for having spoiled his setting with this Goldbergian contraption.)

But Vance has a surprise in store for us, the one sure imaginative touch in the story--his point being precisely that these dryads are out of place in any home-like world. Three men have been transported to the planet, one of whom is suspected of being secretly non-human. He is, and one of the signs of his inner inhumanity is that he smiles upon the dryads, whom he admires as ornamental creatures. A natural man would have been uneasy about them, "for we men don't want fantastic creatures upon a world so dear to us..." (Ch. XI). This is a true thought, and, I would say, a dangerous one. Doesn't it amount to, finally, an impeachment of the fantasy so rife in the rest of the story's background? By fantasy, I mean unrestrained fancy, proliferating inventiveness. It's as if to say: the endlessly novel and exciting is not as truly satisfying as everyday work, rest and quiet in congenial surroundings. It will be noted that the unman, the Star King, is of a piece with the fantasy and a fitting agent to identify its presence here. As a species, the Star Kings are more plastic and diverse than are men: that is, they embody literally, the spirit of restless change that is exhibited everywhere in the background.

The planet of the green valleys is "tarnished" by what takes place there and our decent men turn their backs on it. This is an unhappy ending, because, as the story makes clear, a man can be happy only on such a world as this, which is much like what Earth once was. Men can exist almost anywhere--one of the characters lives on a burnt-out sun, a setting the exact opposite of the green world--but they are most deeply relaxed and at home only on Earth, or a world like it. The environment in which mankind evolved has permeated its entire fabric; it is the native grounds of its well-being; this, I take it, is the meaning of the cited passages as the head of Chapter VI.

The Star Kings, less rigidly cast, are not so narrow in their tastes; but it is not the Star King, as such, who tarnishes the green planet, spoiling it for guiltless habitation. There is only the slightest pretext made that the Star Kings are a menace. Gyle Warweave is not only a Star King, he is also, in his guise as a man, Grendel the Monster, a Demon Prince; he is savage only in his pretended humanity.

There has been grafted onto him a second assumed identity, the purpose being to splice together what are actually two different story-lines. The first of these might be called the background story: that is, the presentation of the great megalopolitan world and the contrasting pastoral world. This is where the real interest of the novel lies, but it is difficult to realize in narrative form. It most easily is mere description and lyricism. The writer has to have recourse to those numerous and lengthy chapter headings to bring all his points to view. The other story-line is the plot: the hero's vengeful quest for Grendel the Monster, which is mostly just conventional and pulpish. This might be called the foreground story. It is relied upon to do the heavy work and to provide second and more specious reasons for the things that happen. So Gyle Warweave's failure to recognize the dryads as unsatisfactory neighbors is not sufficient, it would seem, to identify him as the suspect; there must be contrived a clumsy last-reel escape and denunciation of him by one of his associates. So the disturbingly "unnatural" natural processes of the planet are not enough to disenchant the men with it; its soil must be tainted with death and suffering before they can give it up. It may be that Vance felt that the first elements were too subtle to be regarded by the reader as actionable motives, or that they didn't provide sufficient matter for a long serial. He may be right, but impractical readers like ourselves can only regret that the bulk of the story is unworthy of the rest.

It would be a mistake, though, to see in the foreground story nothing but mere habit or formal excuses for action. There would seem to be some feeling here, too. We notice that the hero's motives of revenge are taken up by other characters. We meet again a figure familiar from earlier stories, the man in the cage, and there is some talk of torture, the treatment of which is fascinated but abstractly synoptic. It is this hatred, perversely erotic in the case of Rampold and Hildemar Dasce, which, transported to the new world, helps taint and poison it. Unfortunately, the novel makes no essential, as distinct from merely circumstantial, connexions between the foreground-action and the background-presentation; that is to say, it draws no inward connexion between the lusts of revenge and hatred and the general speculations on the dissatisfactions of civilized life. We assume that the connexion is possible; but to make it the writer would have had to venture into what he characterizes as "the morass of psychology trempaled by generations of incompetents." If it had been made, The Star King would have been one of the most thoughtful science-fiction stories ever published.

But, to return to actualities and to possibilities closer to hand: Vance writes a long story so as to give us a glimpse of the galactic diorama before alighting briefly on the home-like world. It is not enough, but already we find that events have impugned the freedom and excitement of the wider world and disturbed the peace and security of the smaller. Our appetites are baffled, which is perhaps not quite what the writer intended. (He probably had meant to defeat them. In bafflement there is no acceptance.) If he had treated us to a larger share of the diversity and novelty of the universe--by means of, say, a series of stories, with a simpler and truer version of The Star King as the last--then we might have agreed with that death-wish, that professionally suicidal thought, instinctive to his story: "Yes, this sort of thing, this indulgence in fantasy is not, in the long run, really satisfying..."

This obviously expresses the larger drift of the story, but it is not complete. There is, so to speak, a further clause qualifying the thought and giving us some reason for supposing that we have not seen the last such story from Jack Vance. At the end of The Star King, the hero turns not merely away from the disappointing hoped-for paradise, but stoically back to the familiar world of makeshift institutions, arbitrary customs, sporadic violence--and fantasy.



The RQ Recommends - - - -

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction--January 1964

There are several praiseworthy items in this issue, one being "Thaw and Serve," by a relatively unknown writer, Allen Kim Lang. His theme can be designated as the Compassionate Society, and the problem is: how can criminals be disciplined if direct physical punishment (in particular, bodily confinement) is forbidden? The story actually contains two compassionate societies; in the first (not far removed temporally from our own) no solution has been devised, so the criminal is placed in suspended animation, the assumption being that the Question will have been resolved some generations later, when he awakes.

I do not wish to spoil the reader's enjoyment by a description of the awakening; nor can I convey Mr. Lang's prose style without an extended quotation. Suffice it to say that his particular type of alliterative jive-talk expresses perfectly the personality of the criminal-narrator. At times, Mr. Lang carries his alliteration to excess--"Six Trix Fix Hix flix his inner pix"--but in general he has matched adroitly his subject and style.

Recall that the compassionate society was also the subject of Damon Knight's Country of the Kind (F&SF, June 1955), where criminal aggressiveness has been eliminated genetically from all inhabitants except one. Of course, the similarity of the title to Wells's Country of the Blind was deliberate; for the residents of Mr. Knight's compassionate society are in a sense blind: their aesthetic sensibilities--their notions of "good taste"--have been blunted, so that the lone criminal perceives relationships unseen by anyone else. An artist, one might say, is a person who feels strong emotions and can give to them articulate expression--but in the Country of the Kind, "passion," and therefore the sense of beauty, has been eliminated. Artistic behavior entails a certain derangement of the faculties, and it was Mr. Knight's fundamental insight that any society which inhibits the one necessarily inhibits the other.

(A similar observation is hinted at by Mr. Lang, whose future society, in the narrator's words, is "trimmed of testicularity." The malefactor, if he wishes, can have his libido diffused via surgical methods, so that he can likewise become a "well-adjusted" citizen--but in that state he will find "poetry a bore and love a fiction.")

Returning to the present issue, we find another noteworthy story, also by Damon Knight, "The Tree of Time" (concluding installment)--and we also find a typical van Vogt situation, with the hero, unaware of his proper identity, being manipulated by forces beyond his comprehension.

Mr. Knight's complaint* about the van Vogtian ambiguity and incoherence is well-known; and his present story, I take it, is a conscious attempt to do a van Vogt type of story--and to do it better.

Surely, Tree is at least a partial vindication of Knight's criticism; for it is organized better than any corresponding work of van Vogt. Even if all loose ends are not tied together, one can at least point to particular incidents in Knight's story and say, "This is inconsistent with that or does not fully explain that..." In a van Vogtian epic, like "The World of Null-A," this is impossible: the confusion is multiplied and compounded so often that no particular incident can be assigned as its cause.

Nevertheless, Tree is not nearly so successful as, e.g., this author's Country of the Kind or his expressive miniature, "The Handler." Mr. Knight is just not at ease in an action story of this kind--as can be seen from the frequent rhetorical self-questionings by the protagonist: "What, actually, was happening to him...?" (48), "...how much longer did he have to prepare himself?" (61), "What was wrong with him?" (76). Such questions, I think, ought to be elicited from the reader without prompting from the author.

Also, the present author still has not attained van Vogt's skill at metaphor to convey internal states. Consider, e.g., this passage from van Vogt's "Recruiting Station":

Doubt! His brain was an opaque mass flecked with the moving lights of thoughts, heavy with the gathering pall of his suspicion, knowing finally only one certainty: with so much at stake, he must find out more about the so-called Wizards of Bor.

Here, the obscurity of the hero's knowledge is compared to the physical opaqueness of the mass which comprises his brain, with this comparison being reenforced by the word "pall"--also denoting something foggy or obscure--and "heavy," which designates not only the increasing thickness of the "gathering pall" but also the increasing weight of his present worries.

No such passages occur in Mr. Knight's story, and consequently we only see the protagonist from outside; we do not share that sense of urgency experienced by a van Vogt character--and I believe the rhetorical questions are a tacit acknowledgment of this.

Tree is an effective story, but would have been more effective had van Vogt written it--and I must express the pious wish that Mr. Knight will return to the type of story he does best.

* "Cosmic Jerrybuilder: A.E. van Vogt," In Search of Wonder (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1956), 36-50.

Selected Letters

Dear Mr. Sapiro,

Many thanks for the neat and attractive Lovecraft Symposium, pleasant to view and absorbing to read.

My own first encounter with the famous name was in the Readers' Letters columns of the early Gernsback "Amazings." There were so many rapturous references to "The Colour out of Space" (which had appeared in a previous issue I hadn't got and couldn't get) that I bit my nails to the quick (and the dead) from sheer frustration.

It took me years to catch up on The Colour, though a happy sojourn "At the Mountains of Madness" helped to while away the time.. Nor was I too disappointed. Just a bit, though, I admit, for by then I was no longer a teenager reading uncritically for enjoyment but a published author with high falutin ideas about style. H.P.'s way of hammering horror home at an average ratio of three adjectives (all synonyms of "ghastly") to one noun seemed to me to defeat its own ends by over-emphasis.

Nevertheless, a good deal of the original magic remained (and remains). Bob Bloch goes to the crux of the matter by pointing out that the stories (and this is true of all fiction) should be considered against the background of the times in which they were written. In that perspective they tower like peaks and "The Call of Cthulhu" sounds evocatively across the years.

All the best,

Bill Temple

7 Elm Road, Wembley
Middlesex, England

Of course, Gernsback's letter columns also contained rapturous references to many stories inferior to Lovecraft's. Indeed, Gernsback's own deficiency was not the inability to recognize good stories, but his inability to distinguish good from bad.

One must concede Mr. Temple's objection to Lovecraft's overuse of adjectives, although, as Fritz Leiber remarked, "...these words were used along with very explicit detailed descriptions; they were an added mist of colour that he put on his story..."

Dear Leland,

Have read Lovecraft: A Symposium with great interest. It was a very good job. I hope you will publish the discussion on Clark Ashton Smith...

Best of luck,

Kerry Kent Knudsen

10809 Alclad Ave,
Whittier, Calif. 90607

The C.A. Smith panel, held at the L.A.S.F.S. on 27 February 1964, degenerated toward the end into a harangue by your editor on Smithian versus modern poetry. This part of the recorded transcript was--fortunately--nearly unintelligible and the remainder (in the opinion of the other panelists), not worth the labour necessary to save it from oblivion. As partial atonement, I promise some printable comments on C.A. Smith in a future issue.

Dear Mr. Sapiro:

Thank you for sending me a copy of Lovecraft: a Symposium. It has been some time since I've read Lovecraft... but the impression lingers in the mind, and I've enjoyed reading the Symposium.

I don't read much science-fiction nowadays, for I have my hands full with the standard literature of the Victorian period--my teaching field. But now and then I stray outside my field, see something, and write an article about it. The enclosed article on Poe's "Usher" represents such an excursion.

Sincerely,

J.O. Bailey

Box 414, Chapel Hill
North Carolina

Dr. Bailey's "What Happens in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" appeared in the January American Literature (445-66), and ought to be of interest to any serious student of Poe.

In his article, Dr. Bailey cites (p.460) T.C. Mabbott's remark about the occult "sympathy" between Roderick Usher, Madeline Usher, and the House--and it is interesting to note that Mabbott, in turn, acknowledges that this particular insight was originally Lovecraft's:

"...his (Lovecraft's) recognition of the central theme of The House of Usher as the possession of but one soul by brother, sister, and the house itself seems to have been as novel as it is obviously correct..."

("H.P. Lovecraft: an Appreciation," Marginalia (Arkham House, 1944), p.339)

For the record, Lovecraft's citation appears in Supernatural Horror in Literature (New York: Ben Abramson, 1945), p.58.

192 Mountain View, Los Angeles 90057

Dear Lee--

The feast you've set forth in this initial issue of RQ with its uniquely fine articles by Cox, Neville, and yourself, the splendid atmospheric cuts by Schneeman, and the fine general layout by Bjo, is at once a considerable accomplishment in itself and a stimulating promise of things to come.

In fact, I can't recall when I've pushed myself back from a table of contents with a sense of more satisfactory repletion--or a greater anticipation for the groaning boards yet to be spread. As a Fitzgerald character remarks somewhere, "Mes compliments au chef--and seconds on the goddam pommes frites!"

So much for my gustatory evaluation--let us sort the picketed bones and remnant savories for specific comment, hein?

Cox's review of The Star King seems to me the sort of incisive and definitive discussion that enriches a work by its sympathy and understanding. It is difficult to imagine a sensitive reader not finding his interest and pleasure in the Vance novel enhanced through having read this review.

One statement in Cox's piece puzzled me, however--in his summation of the seeming attractions of the world of the Oikume, an odd non sequitur seems to occur: "The reader" (Cox writes)"easily considers that such a world might be a better world than the one he lives in. It is open and unlimited, the cops aren't all powerful, there are places for an honest man to hide...." I feel the observation is a cynical commentary on our own society, in which too often the strictly honest man is at a disadvantage in a world of "legal" predators. However, since an honest man would gain little from simply "hiding" out, the statement is not wholly effective; perhaps an explicatory expression is needed, such as, "to hide and thrive," or "to hide and prosper," if the valid point is to be driven home.

Effective and moving as Neville's Westercon XVI address is, I find myself at odds with certain of his opinions and conclusions. These are basic things, and suggest a considerable variegation of reaction among the cognoscenti regarding s.f. itself and its future. These differences would, however, require greater length than I care to undertake in a letter. Perhaps, though, the RQ could make use of an article developing them in a future issue.

The British spelling throughout the RQ is an interesting innovation in an American publication, and I ponder the point of the affectation. The explanatory footnotes for fan terms, however, I dig, since I know your circulation extends well outside the fan field, and university libraries et al need some such orientation to these bits of faniana.

William Blackbeard

I look forward to your extended comments on Neville's speech. After seeing Webster's Third, a compendium of popular usage which makes no pretence at being a dictionary, I felt obliged to switch to the Oxford.







